

INFLUENCES IN AMERICAN PAINTING 1963  
WITH A PRESENTATION OF THE THESIS PAINTINGS

by

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## INTRODUCTION

Whatever determines the creative life span of a style of painting is one of the mysteries of art and to solve it within the limits of this thesis would be impossible. Instead, the purpose of writing this paper was to determine to the author's satisfaction the prevalent styles influencing American art in 1963. In order to accomplish this purpose, careful research and weighing of various opinions of art historians along with the study of statements by the artists involved was necessary. Many contemporary art books studied appeared to be biased toward one particular movement or style. Others proved to be so encompassing as to say very little about the actual aims of the painters involved. Therefore, I beg the indulgence of the reader if some of the styles discussed in this thesis appear to be slanted as to importance in the instances where a current in painting was felt to be strong enough to merit attention, but proved small in number of painters. A general non-committal attitude of a great many of the painters involved proved to be an additional difficulty.

This thesis was written with the intent to clarify certain aspects of contemporary American painting and to strengthen or discredit some of the candidate's existing opinions and beliefs prior to this research and writing. It is the hope of the candidate that others might find this research beneficial in clarifying certain aspects of their own work or to provide them with a different insight into the painting of 1963.

In conjunction with this discussion, the candidate has presented a group of paintings created during the time of this writing. A brief essay accompanies the works containing some of the candidate's views pertaining to the various problems and aspects of his studio work.

#### ROMANTIC REALISM

A logical beginning for a discussion of the American painting styles prevalent in 1963 appeared to be one of the various facets of realism. Realism or some form of more or less realistic delineation of subject matter to convey a statement to the viewer is as old as art as we know it. Since prehistoric times man has sought to depict his life and surroundings in a naturalistic manner. Until the invention of the camera, art was necessary if for no other reason than its function as a visual recording device.

One of the oldest styles prevalent today in American painting has to do with the depiction of realistic subject matter to express a romantic attitude or meaning. For the purpose of discussion, I have labeled this style romantic realism. There has been a marked decrease since 1940 in the number of painters in America working in this style. Many men who once belonged in this group have moved in other directions and apparently few younger painters have chosen to follow this devotion to realism and motif which this style demands. Nearly all the good romantic realists working in 1963 were bound together by something other

than merely a desire to fool the eye with a clever manipulation of paint. There exists a common bond in their work which is that each one has something to say about the meaning of life. Realism as such has remained important to them in that they deal with specific situations concerning man and nature, which only a quite exacting use of medium and motif can portray.

In studying these painters they sometimes appeared as two groups. One was interested in the romantic portrayal of a specific mood and the other interested in the interpretation of objective events. However, the two overlap to such an extent that it was unnecessary to separate them in this discussion.

Typical of painters of this style in 1963 were Charles Burchfield, Alexander Brook, Edward Hopper, Andrew Wyeth and Ben Kanihira. These men were not the only painters representative of this style, but they seemed consistent enough in approach over a period of time to appear as a group in this writing.

Statements made by these painters showed them to be quite intolerant of other styles in painting and in general admirers of each others work. Most authors seemed uncertain as to whether or not romantic realism as presented here would continue to attain enough support to be classed as a major style in American painting, but none would refute the fact that they have contributed much in the use of exacting painting techniques and more important the methods of conveying a specific mood from the canvas to the viewer.

## PRECISION REALISM

Although the ranks of the romantic realists have thinned somewhat in recent years another form of extreme realism has grown steadily. This growth has taken place in the development of a form of precise realism not unrelated to the "fool the eye" painting of the late 19th century. A grouping of some of the painters of this style in 1963 would include George Tooker, Charles Sheeler, Paul Cadmus and Walter Murch.

Tooker might have summed up much of the feeling of this group in Seldon Rodman's book, Conversations with Artists. There he states that his aim is to paint reality so hard that it recurs as a dream. As a group these men are primarily analytical rather than visual in their treatments of the subject. The effect is more like looking at life with a magnifying glass rather than exactly mirroring reality. "Nearly all the American artists painting in this style owe a debt to the work of Grant Wood."<sup>1</sup>

These painters strive to create an aura of mystery in the commonplace objects which they observe. Some of them such as Paul Cadmus occupy a rather ambiguous position which is somewhere between objective statement and satirical intent. Others of the group strive to make a comment on general human condition. The common ground shared by artists in this style was a notable lack of interest in illusionism for its own sake and a need to express themselves in the most precise imagery.

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<sup>1</sup>John I. H. Baur, American Art of Our Century, p. 139.



The artists mentioned above have stayed within the boundaries of this grouping for some period of time. Others such as Bernard Perlin and Stephen Greene have found it necessary to move on to a form of expression granting more freedom to the individual artist. As early as 1956, Perlin expressed a desire to loosen his technique. He felt the control of the style to be personally deadly and was forced to free himself. The artists mentioned as part of the group of precise realists as of 1963 have apparently never felt confined by its dictations and continued to keep the style healthy and not simply a return to the "fool the eye" style which existed primarily for the sake of illusionism.

Painters such as Andrew Wyeth seem to fluctuate between romanticism and this more precise form of realism. Artists such as Wyeth make it most difficult to classify them into a definite style, however enough painters were working with a form of precise imagery and enough have recently used it as a departure point to cause me to count its presence as a strong influence in 1963 painting.

#### SURREALISM

Surrealism was defined by its founder, Andre Breton, as:

. . . pure psychic automatism, by which it is intended to express, verbally, in writing or by other means, the real process of thought. It is thought's dictation, all exercise of reason and every aesthetic or moral preoccupation being absent.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>John Bernard Meyers, Evergreen Review, p. 75.

Surrealism was less a style in 1963 than a method; a method of most spontaneous transference of images of the subconscious to the canvas without consideration as to form or design. It is apparent in this statement the profound influence surrealism has had on abstract expressionism.

The surrealist program of search for the material of art in the subconscious has had a great influence upon painters of fantasy and also upon many expressionists and realists, who have made use of its irrational juxtapositions of pictorial elements. "Surrealistic and romantic painting are both born of a poetic imagination and poetic effect in a broad sense of the word", according to Alfred H. Barr, Jr., in a book on modern painting.

There appeared to be few if any painters practicing surrealism by 1963 in the sense that subconsciousness is the source of all that is valuable in art. The areas to which the surrealists have made the most lasting contributions have previously been mentioned. Some of the artists closest to this style in 1963 would be Morris Graves, Theodore Roszak (as a painter), Kurt Seligman and Gerald McLaughlin. Perhaps these men should be labeled mystics rather than surrealists as none appeared surrealist in a strict orthodox manner. Roszak and McLaughlin employed the violent dismemberment of figures and juxtaposition of unrelated parts. Seligman seemed to paint forms that truly must have grown from the inner mind. Each artist was in pursuit of his own private vision in areas far removed from common experience.



If dedicated introspection is enough justification to be called a surrealist than Morris Graves was perhaps the most surrealist painter of 1963. His works in his own words have to do with "phenomenal spaces, mental spaces and spaces of consciousness".<sup>1</sup> Living nearly the life of a recluse his paintings grow one after another from consciously devised symbols, but the images have forced their way up from the hidden recesses of the mind.

Today orthodox surrealism in America seems nearly dead as a movement, but the currents of fantasy and of spontaneity which it released in our art still flow strongly in many diverse channels.

#### SOCIAL COMMENTATORS AND SYMBOLISTS

Until the time of the French Revolution art had a definite social function. It had to act as historian and spokesman for the church, royalty and aristocracy. The creative artists in our age have been individualists rather than institutionalists; more interested in human and democratic values than in championing material power and wealth. Although the American social movement of the early 1900's did not survive the world events of the late 1930's, it had a permanent influence on American art. It introduced moral convictions into painting and sculpture, broadened subject matter to include issues vital to everyone, and introduced new elements of imagination and new forms of

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<sup>1</sup>Seldon Rodman, Conversations with Artists, p. 12.

symbolism. By 1963, social content was still a part of American painting with strong individual exponents. It was no longer the single propaganda as in the 1930's, but an art which used social material for imaginative ends. The dominate attitude had shifted to one of sympathy and humanity. The general approach of the social painters of 1963 had changed as had their subjects. Social comment, by its nature, was a reflection of the issues which concern man at a given moment, and these issues rarely remain constant.

Most of the paintings of the early 1960's which might be considered as social comment tend to deal with the nature of man and of his relations to other men rather than with specific economic problems.<sup>1</sup>

A group of painters who in 1963 were still concerned with this type of painting would include Ben Shahn, Jacob Lawrence, Jack Levine, Robert Gwathney and Philip Evergood. The first four men would be excellent examples of social commentators as nearly all of their work has been conceived along this line. Evergood, however, was an example of the painters who walked the thin line between social comment and expressionism. In his own words he was "interested in various liberal and radical causes" and felt that a painter must know the humanity of his time. On the other hand a great many of his paintings dealt with a subject so specific that it could hardly be considered as social comment on the basis of interest to the general public.

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<sup>1</sup>John I. H. Baur, American Art of Our Century, p. 163.

Ben Shahn expressed in words and painting a constant concern and compassion for suffering. His intention was to be absorbed with "man's state and not man's fate". He always started with an idea. Shahn felt that he must strive to communicate more than a fragment of the world which was what he felt that the abstract expressionists did in their work.

Robert Gwathney has been concerned with the American negroes and their relation to others. Jacob Lawrence, a negro painter, has been interested in expressing society in general and felt that he must express the capacity of the life and people around him. Jack Levine and his wife, Ruth Gilkow, both considered themselves to be primarily humanists. Jack Levine has confessed to painting with a script in mind and found a challenge in trying to beat the instantaneous truths recorded by the camera.

Social comment is not likely to disappear from painting as long as there are artists who feel that art is not an end in itself, but a means by which the artist is morally obligated to use in the service of his fellow men. The underlying philosophy of social commentary painting has generally been quite liberal and humanitarian in nature, one which finds life and art to be inseparable.

#### EXPRESSIONISM

Since the Armory show of 1913, expressionism has remained an important current in American painting. The number of artists embracing this style and its accompanying philosophies seemed to have grown rather than diminished since the 1940's. This

statement would be particularly valid if one were to include within expressionism's boundaries the abstract expressionistic movement of the 1950's. However, since the latter tended to break so decisively with imagery it will be discussed under a separate heading. Only expressionistic works, executed in a more or less representational vein which deal only with the recognizable world and distort it in many ways to convey more vividly an expression or mood, come under this heading in this particular section.

The leading figures even in this limited classification did not really have a concise mutual program or much solidarity as a group. Each was striving to express a concept of life through a form of personal vision which had grown out of the artist's own nature. Their only common ground being that all have used marked distortions of visual reality and that these distortions were conceived so as to elevate feeling in a work over intellect as the ultimate value in the painting. This intensity of feeling in a work is a true tradition of expressionism. Other traditional devices of expressionism developed in European painting and in particular in the work of the German painters were in general disregarded in the search for different forms of a more purely American form of expressionism. Expressionists in 1963 owed a great debt to these earlier European influences, but for the most part each artist in his own search for a personal expression had abandoned them.

Karl Knaths was one of the oldest American expressionists painting in 1963. He had devoted his life to the search for new

methods of employing the common forms of subject matter as expressive pictorial elements. Lee Gatch was another painter of this same nature. Mr. Gatch related nature to abstraction but in his own opinion leaned most heavily toward nature which he distorted to produce the haunting mood prevalent in a great majority of his works. Many painters from the so called "new figure school" would join this group within the limitations set forth. Richard Diebenkorn was leaning heavily toward formal German expressionism in 1963. Elmer Bischoff was most expressionistic in use of color and treatment of the figure as well as in the design of the picture plane. The paintings of Rico Lebrun come under this heading by his own statement that he has painted "a continuous, sustained, uncontrived image, motivated by nothing but passion". He constantly dealt with man's sufferings, torments and fears as have many expressionists before him.

Even people so diverse in style as John Heliker with his landscapes and Loren MacIver's paintings of the "simple miracles of life" showed common expressionistic philosophy in that they both depicted a mood of enchantment in their work.

Abraham Rattner could be the culmination of nearly everything that expressionism had promoted in American art by 1963. His curving lines of force and strong color were quite expressionistic tendencies. The strong emotional content was particularly evident in his various uses of religious motifs and in his own words he has always worked on the idea of "reduction of elements and strengthening of structure to arrange relationships in a work into a total unity".



The profound issues of the spirit were present in expressionism in 1963. Use of distortion was prevalent in the work of all the artists mentioned; although in some paintings, such as Lebrun's, the distortions were more organic than formal. Their motifs come from anything that might have struck a chord within the artist or from things which only suggest a formal possibility worth exploring.

The type of expressionism done in 1963 required only that the artist trust his emotions and develop these into his work and this in turn into art by whatever transformation of nature he could devise.

#### ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

Abstract expressionism was the first American-born art movement to have a profound international effect. It has probably altered the character of American painting more than any other style in American art history; both in its tremendous number of followers and in the strong reactions against its doctrines.

There were many early sources for abstract expressionism which contradict the layman's belief that it simply sprang suddenly and without notice upon the American art scene. It inherited its rejection of subject matter from earlier forms of abstraction and from this rejection grew its doctrine of the primacy of the medium. It broke with cubism in discarding all aesthetic interest,<sup>1</sup> but it borrowed heavily from surrealism

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John I. H. Baur, American Art of Our Century, p. 215.



the guidance of the subconscious mind during the creative act.<sup>2</sup> It pursued the theory of automatism and anti-aesthetic belief to more extreme conclusions than ever before. Pure abstract expressionism, as presented here, was in 1963 a deeply introspective art form, little changed by time since its post World War II beginning. The abstract expressionistic painters that will be discussed in the following paragraphs were still pursuing the original philosophies of this particular style in 1963. Many original followers had shifted directions by this time and were engrossed in developing a different form of abstraction from nature or a type of abstraction dealing primarily with geometric forms. These abstract styles will be discussed under separate headings.

Abstract expressionism as presented here dealt with the original introspective form of art, with no intentional relation to the external world. In theory it was a form of self expression rooted exclusively in the mind and spirit of the individual artists. It proved that the elements of design could be used in a way that was not primarily aesthetic and still embody impulses that had valid artistic content in their own right. This knowledge would be one of the greatest contributions and influences of this movement.

Since the following of the style has become so vast and has involved so great a number of painters, a logical method of discussion would be to point out some of the better painters in

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John Bernard Meyers, Evergreen Review, pp. 76-78.

each of its areas of contribution of the use of certain expressive devices. The three main devices of expression brought to light by this group were: the development of a personal calligraphy, the use of expressive brush stroke, the use of amorphous shapes and stains of color.<sup>3</sup>

Of these three, a personal calligraphy appeared to be the least popular with the abstract expressionistic painters in 1963. Although it was the first innovation to gain a great deal of recognition through perhaps its greatest practitioner, Jackson Pollack, few painters chose to pursue this very difficult approach. One who did develop it on a giant scale was Franz Kline. Since the deaths of both Kline and Pollack, only one important American artist has continued to develop a personal calligraphic style as his most important device for self expression. That painter has been Mark Tobey. Although others used calligraphy extensively they seem to place themselves more readily into one of the latter two categories. Calligraphy, however has continued to have a sizable following among the important European painters which unfortunately are outside the limitations of this thesis.

Mark Tobey was one of several artists who had been painting non-objectively long before it became fashionable. He was greatly influenced and impressed by oriental thought and oriental calligraphy during visits to the Far East. Upon his return to

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<sup>3</sup>John I. H. Baur, American Art of Our Century, pp. 220-222.

America he sought to employ calligraphy as an expressive tool in his painting.<sup>4</sup> Tobey has never admitted to being an adherent to abstract expressionistic doctrine, but was convinced at an early date that the critical moment in a good painting definitely takes place in a type of introspective trance which guides the hand to solutions unthought of by the conscious mind. By this very belief he would merit discussion with this particular group.

It is a much simpler task to list painters who employ an expressive brush stroke to help convey the content of their works to the viewer. Willem de Kooning would have to be one of the greatest pioneers of this style still painting in 1963. Other important painters to be included would be Jack Tworikov, Joan Mitchell, James Brooks, Milton Resnick, Paul Burlin and Philip Guston to name only a few. In the work of each of these men the feelings of life and motion conveyed to the viewer depend most heavily on their particular application of the paint to the surface. Some are quite methodical and others have the appearance of rapid execution, but each of the painters mentioned definitely had a personal although similar style to which a great deal of their strength must be attributed.

In the use of amorphous shapes and stains of color one painter, Mark Rothko, came particularly to mind. Rothko claimed only to be interested in expressing basic human emotions,<sup>6</sup> but

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<sup>4</sup>Seldon Rodman, Conversations with Artists, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>6</sup>Peter Seltz, Mark Rothko, p. 3.

in striving for this difficult form of communication he became a master of color and simple amorphous shape on a giant scale. Other painters of 1963 still investigating the expressive possibilities of these particular devices were Conrad Marca-Relli, Theodoros Stamos, Clifford Still, Robert Motherwell, Adolf Gottlieb and Sam Francis. Each has contributed significantly to the movement and in each one's work the character of the brushwork has generally appeared to be subordinate to the form.

The very freedom of abstract expressionism has perhaps been its greatest harm. Its innovators attracted many followers who attempted to imitate their personal manipulations of the media without giving enough attention to the thought and considerations beyond the surface image. In order to be strong in any particular direction of art no matter what the medium, one must accept the mental disciplines of the movement.

#### SEMI-ABSTRACTION

In recent years the initial concepts of abstract expressionism have been partially transformed into a less introspective art with a new orientation toward imagery. This imagery was not immediately tangible as in realistic painting styles, but a kind that had grown from the desire of the artists to communicate something slightly more tangible, even if only tangible in the imagination, to the viewer. This movement has been labeled semi-abstraction in this discussion.

That painters of this group employ the techniques peculiar to abstract expressionism is understandable since many of them

were forerunners of that movement. Others would have to be included as semi-abstractionists for their very willingness to pursue the subject and imagery while making use of many of the freedoms of technique liberated completely and brought to acceptance by the abstract expressionists. By this slight deviation they have given a different orientation to abstract expressionism. The dividing line between invented forms and those derived from nature has become increasingly more obscure. The moment that imagery enters into a work, however, associations become established which relate the artist's experience to nature and to other men. The men who practiced this form of semi-abstractation in 1963 did not feel, as the abstract expressionists did, that this association would dilute the quality of the work and steal somewhat from its expressive content.

Hans Hofman would have to be considered as one of the most progressive painters of semi-abstractation in 1963. A philosophy of nature underlies every aspect of his art,<sup>1</sup> which at first viewing would appear totally abstract in many respects. Robert Goodnough, though heavily influenced by cubism, and Ruben Tam, who has continued to make abstract statements about observed landscapes, would be included in this grouping. These three painters are good examples of three quite different approaches to the problems of painting in this semi-abstract style which has developed rapidly since World War II. At the time of this

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<sup>1</sup>William Seitz, Hans Hofman, p. 11.



writing it was observed that an increasing number of painters were turning once again toward some form of more or less limited investigation of imagery.

The list of painters of this style would be long if one were to include painters such as Willem de Kooning, who fluctuate between this group and total abstract expressionism. Painters such as Balcomb Greene, who never agreed with abstract expressionism in its entirety and who have been leading figures among its opponents, must be mentioned.

It appeared that this form of painting was gaining followers by 1963 which had and would in all probability again have a definite influence upon American painting.

#### GEOMETRIC ABSTRACTION

Geometric abstraction, long neglected in American art, was beginning to gain a great number of followers by 1963. The sources of this movement were as diverse as the works of its leading practitioners.

Josef Albers had adhered to his German Bauhaus standards where he worked before coming to America in 1933. He was a spokesman for the philosophy of an art built exclusively on formal relations, freed of representation, with no associations and dependent only on the interaction of form and color for effect. He was a devout disciple of this doctrine with his constant investigation of pure color and simple rectilinear shape. Included with Albers in the pursuit of aesthetic Bauhaus



tradition in 1963 was Fritz Glarner. Glarner allowed himself the use of slight diagonal tensions which present different aesthetic problems to the viewer. Another practitioner of this very formal type of expression was Ilya Bolotowsky. Mr. Bolotowsky was one of the few painters of this period often concerned with the relation of his rectilinear forms in relation to a tondo painting surface.

Painters such as I. Rice Pereira, Gabor Peterdi and Jimmy Ernst appeared at the opposite end of this geometric style. These painters always instilled various romantic and definitely associative elements into their works. As a group these painters were more interested in re-exploring the cubistic theories and other formal approaches, but in each case the approach never appeared as purely aesthetic as that of Albers or Glarner.

Stuart Davis was an excellent example of a strong painter somewhere between the two extremes of this style. He developed his own theory of geometric abstraction over a long period of time. As a result of this careful investigation he was able to give great strength to his works in this direction in 1963. His use of pure color and his competent organization of geometric form endows each work with a life of its own.

The greatest downfall of geometric abstraction would appear to have been its constant exploitation for commercial aspects. Even though it seldom achieves great aesthetic power in its commercial use, it so saturates the public that they sometimes fail to see its strength as fine art in its own right.

During 1963 a number of painters who were making new statements and attempting to show new avenues for this geometric approach deserve mention at this time. They had gained enough following for the critics to dub them with the name "hard-edge" painters. Their styles were not necessarily innovations, but each was quite personal and dedicated to his individual approach. Painters such as Barnett Newman, Ellsworth Kelly, Ad Reinhardt, Will Barnett and Jack Youngerman were all developing various aspects of formal abstraction in their search for a simple, valid artistic statement. They had in common a love for relations of simple shape and in most cases were intrigued with feelings of monumental scale. Many painters in this group placed a heavy reliance upon nature for their initial inspiration, but others were simply in pursuit of new aesthetic relations.

This style of painting is almost sure to continue to make important contributions, at least of aesthetic nature, to American art as it has from its introduction into this country.

#### "POP ART"

Historically, the newest form of American painting in 1963 was that movement labeled by the critics and curators of the major museums as "pop art".<sup>1</sup> Although this type of painting was most definitely a form of realism, it is discussed under a separate heading since it appears to break so decisively with

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<sup>1</sup>Gedzahler, Seltz, and others. "A Symposium on Pop Art". Arts Magazine, April, 1963, 37-45.

the tradition of art. This type of painting (here painting is used in the broadest sense of the word as much "pop art" has been executed with the aid of stencils and other mechanical devices) was a formal art form. It was an art of decisions and choices rather than one of pure aesthetics and paint quality.

Roy Lichtenstein, a leading "pop" painter, defined this movement as simply the use of commercial art as subject matter in painting.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this would come as close as anything to a definition acceptable to all the so called "pop" painters discussed in the following paragraphs. Mr. Lichtenstein felt that the image should be threatening in content to the observer and he attempted to achieve this content by presenting a very commercial form of art, the comic strip, to the viewer on a giant scale. He altered the image considerably in most cases in order to insure the viewer's disturbance. Lichtenstein disagreed with his critics who said he was anti-art in the sense that his art did not transform but merely depicted. However, he always attempted to redesign the original image no matter how slight the change might appear at first glance. He claimed to have used the comic strip for purely formal reasons and expressed his belief that the subjects depicted were of little importance to the finished painting.<sup>3</sup> Lichtenstein felt the greatest criticism of his work stemmed from the fact that it didn't look like a

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<sup>2</sup>Swenson, G. R. "What is Pop Art". Part I, Art News, November, 1963, 62:23.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

painting of something, but rather it appeared to be the thing itself. "If one is to capture the intensity of a comic strip or billboard then one must paint it in its original style."<sup>4</sup>

Mr. Lichenstein felt that to do a mechanical thing in a "painterly" style would greatly dilute it. "I think the meaning of my work is industrial, it is what all the world will soon become."<sup>5</sup>

Robert Indiana gave further insight into the style by proclaiming that "pop art" was everything that art had not been for the twenty years preceding it. It was a complete reversal back to representationalism. To Mr. Indiana, "pop" was the "American dream" as most of his paintings were titled. He felt that something had to spring away from abstract expressionism, which by its own logic was the end of art. The painters of "pop art" were eager to return to some type of imagery. Indiana proposed that "pop art" was itself of two schools, the hard core and the hard edge, of which he himself subscribed to the latter.<sup>6</sup> "Pop art" was instant art. He believed that this movement best conveyed the intuition that man's greatest problem was himself. In Indiana's opinion, "pop art" was pre-sold to the American public by the abstract expressionists' fight for acceptance. "Pop" was very much an American form of painting for it was the "great American myth".<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Swenson, G. R. "What is Pop Art". Part I, Art News, November, 1963, 62:63.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

James Rosenquist felt that art must return to depicting images, but the image had to be one of recent history in order to be valid as a "pop" image.<sup>8</sup> He feared that if the "pop" artists were too abstract, people would make something of it other than what it was, and thereby have an irrelevant reaction to the work. He did not want to create an image with nostalgic overtones.

Paint and paint quality are natural things. Therefore, they had no place in the painting of the unnatural "pop" image. "Pop" artists felt that the image should have the impact of advertising since the scope of painting communication was exceedingly old fashioned when compared with radio and television. Mr. Rosenquist tried to get as far from nature as possible with little or no involvement in the canvas. The relations of the image in "pop art" may be the subject matter, but the content must be something more. "Subject matter isn't popular images."<sup>9</sup>

Jasper Johns was one of the first recognized painters of this style, but in 1963 he claimed a different underlying philosophy. His paintings of popular images were not just those images for their own sake. He was concerned with things not being what they were, but with their becoming something other than a target, American flag, etc. He felt that subject matter was merely determined by what the viewer was willing to say it was in any

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<sup>8</sup>Swenson, G. R. "What is Pop Art". Part II, Art News, February, 1964, 62:40.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 41.

given work. He believed that there wasn't any value in the type of thinking which puts limits on things and regretted that the artists did not have more control over the way his work was to be viewed by the public.

James Dine was another painter grouped in most cases with the leading "pop" artists, who personally felt that his work was not pure "pop". In the respect that he did not deal with the "popular" image he was correct. His interest in making paintings of personal images of his own surroundings, his walls, his studio, etc., placed him in a somewhat different light. In 1963 he was only interested in style as method used in order to make a picture work. He felt that for an artist to have a style signified that he had only one way to go and the only thing that could make a work successful was to make it say what he wanted it to say. If some set "style" appeared in the work it was secondary to the work itself. Mr. Dine felt that the work of Edward Hopper was closely related to "pop" art in the way he painted gas stations, houses, and streets. He felt that it was the fault of the general viewer in not being able to get past the subject matter in the work of the "pop" artist. This was a common agreement among a great many of the painters discussed in this group.

The "pop" object is used to make art and not to bridge the gap between art and life as they can never be the same thing. According to Mr. Dine, any work of art if successful will make a comment on what it is about, however, people confused "pop" art with social comment and too many viewers never were able to get



past this exterior message.<sup>10</sup>

Andy Warhol was best known in 1963 for his works containing repetitious silkscreen stencils of the same subject. He felt that everyone should be like everyone else and this was the feeling he was trying to communicate through his giant canvases. He believed that "pop" art was liking things and this in turn was like being a machine, for everyone in his opinion liked the same things. He believed that artists who were not very good should become like everyone else so that people would like things that aren't very good. In Warhol's opinion style did not make any difference and he wanted all artists to be accepted. In other words, people would be mechanical in that all would be accepted and nothing rejected. Warhol felt that someone else should be able to do his paintings for him. He quit commercial art because it forced him to invent things. Perhaps his views were correct, but they would appear to be deadly to the creative individual.

Stephen Durkee summed up the "pop" movement with his statements that "pop art" was all there, on whatever level that the viewer wanted to see it. Real traditions of art are thousands of years old so therefore "pop" did not break tradition as claimed. It was all right if the viewer's reaction was negative, for the viewer in this case should simply have shared the artist's negation.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Swenson, G. R. "What is Pop Art". Part I, Art News, November, 1963, 62:23.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., Part II, February, 1964, p. 42.

This would appear to be the correct means of examining and evaluating the "pop art" of 1963. More time will be needed to even begin to evaluate its worth or if the case may be, its lack of value. However, it should be pointed out at this time that the rise of an important movement in art never was the result simply of a shift to subject matter.<sup>12</sup>

### CONCLUSION

It is felt by the candidate that painting, like music, exists to be enjoyed rather than commented on. It is not the artist's duty to defend his work, but rather to simply share it. If his work has given him pleasure in its creation, he should be willing to try to communicate this pleasure to others.

The nature of this writing necessitated arbitrary groupings of painters by the author. Readers will agree with some and should disagree with others as their own thoughts dictate. Any creative artist is surely an individual and to even attempt to classify him with a group should bring disagreement from the artists concerned. There are perhaps as many actual "styles" in painting as there are painters.

The purpose of this writing has been to clarify certain aspects of contemporary painting in the candidate's mind. It has been his hope that this research will prove beneficial in his further artistic growth and development. In all probability every artist has felt a similar need at one time or another.

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<sup>12</sup>James S. Ackerman. "Abstract Art and the Critics", Atlantic, October, 1962, 210:73-78.

## DISCUSSION AND PRESENTATION OF THESIS PAINTINGS

The paintings presented on the following pages were executed by the candidate during the course of the research and writing of this thesis. The candidate has drawn heavily upon the forces, forms, and structures found in nature for their creation. He has endeavored to give a personal interpretation to the abstraction underlying this observance of nature and to accomplish this he has drawn upon both observed forms and those that are stimulated in the imagination.

The works presented have been selected by the candidate as those felt by him to be of the greatest importance in this period of his artistic development.

The candidate has constantly been concerned with attempting to achieve a form of organization that has strength in its own right out of the disorganized lines and forms that appeared on the canvas. The works are not mechanical and hard as much of the structures of man, but rather are an attempt to capture some of the informal lyrical sense which pervades nature as observed by the artist. The border between representation and nonrepresentation is often indistinct in contemporary painting. However, no associative imagery as such has been intended in the works presented on the following pages.

Names are given to the candidate's paintings after or sometimes during the time of their creation as the images begin to have a personal meaning to the artist. In the candidate's paintings the first statement conceived on the canvas determines the

next. Attempts to preconceive an exact image result in stifling the feelings of arrested motion that must appear for the canvas to have a life of its own in the eyes of the artist.

The candidate feels that the primary aim of the artist should be to grow as a person and if this growth is attained the work in whatever medium should develop as it will. To strive simply to produce one single perfect work of art is futile for if this work was produced, it would by its very perfection be the end of the artist's growth and purpose.

In closing this writing, the candidate would like to present a quotation by the painter, Theodoros Stamos, which the candidate feels to be an excellent summation of his own feelings and thoughts on painting.

Considering that so much has been and will be written on art, in the last analysis, painting at its best consists of truth to one's paint, to one's self and one's time,<sup>1</sup> and most of all to one's God and one's dream.

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<sup>1</sup>New American Painting. Museum of Modern Art, 1958.



Heat - George No. 3

Oil 34" x 46"

Fig. 1.



Winter 1963 No. 1

Oil 36" x 48"

Fig. 2.





Oil 26" x 48"

Winter 1963 No. 3

Fig. 3.

Oil 36" x 48"

Winter Image No. 4



Fig. 4.

Oil 76" x 48"

Angry Black



Fig. 5.

Oil 36" x 48"

Image Descending



Fig. 6.

Oil 26" x 48"

Images on Blue



Fig. 7.

Oil 36" x 48"

Red, White and Blue



Fig. 8.





Oil 36" x 49"

Sound of Spring

Fig. 9.

Oil 26w x 48w

Heat Image No. 5



Fig. 10.

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INFLUENCES IN AMERICAN PAINTING 1963  
WITH A PRESENTATION OF THESIS PAINTINGS

by

JOHN ANDREW BRITTON

B. A., Kansas State University, 1962

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AN ABSTRACT

of

A MASTER'S THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

College of Architecture and Design

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1964



This thesis was conceived as a combination of research into contemporary American painting and the candidate's personal studio work. It was the hope and intention of the candidate that the research involved in this writing would be beneficial to increasing the strength of his painting.

The first part of this thesis presents a survey of influences and movements in American painting that appeared to be prevalent in 1963. For purposes of discussion the author found it necessary to present certain painters of this period in groupings according to various observed aspects of their work and certain mutual philosophies. These groupings were developed from observation of paintings at exhibitions and in catalogues, a study of statements by these painters where available and by the weighing of various opinions of art historians and critics. The various painters considered are presented under these headings: Romantic Realism, Precision Realism, Surrealism, Symbolism, Social Commentators, Expressionism, Abstract Expressionism, Semi-Abstraction, Geometric Abstraction and "Pop Art".

Ten examples of the candidate's oil paintings are presented in the second major part of this thesis. Photographs of these paintings are included in the text along with a brief essay containing the candidate's personal beliefs in regard to his own studio work. It was felt by the author that a personal evaluation of this nature was necessary at this stage of his artistic development in order to strengthen or discredit various personal beliefs and clarify certain aspects of his own studio work.

It is the candidate's belief that research and observation of this nature is essential to some extent in the personal development of most artists at one time or another regardless of their preferred medium. The conclusions and observations presented in this thesis might well serve as a starting point for a more intensive study of a particular aspect of contemporary painting of interest to the reader. It was observed during the course of this writing that there are perhaps as many styles and influences in painting as there are creative individuals who choose to express themselves through painting. However, it was concluded that enough painters were interested in similar uses of the medium or had enough common philosophy to treat them as influential groups in a discussion of this nature.